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SUBJECT: NO ROOM IN MINSK FOR UCP CONGRESS?

Now Hear This: Donkey Convention at the Elephant House

¶1. (SBU) After receiving refusals from 22 sites as well as from the Minsk Municipal Executive Committee, the United Civic Party (UCP) held an emergency session of its Political Council April 17 and voted to hold its 11th Party Congress at the Minsk headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). At a press conference attended by A/DCM April 18, UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko told a small group of assembled journalists that the party's Political Council had voted to hold the conference at BPF HQ in Minsk -- in spite of the fact that the venue has less than one-fifth of the necessary seating. The move would allow UCP to remain in compliance with its bylaws that require a congress be held every two years. Lebedko added that UCP had considered holding its party congress at its Grodno office, which has sufficient space for the more than 200 delegates expected.

This idea was rejected, however, when Grodno municipal fire officials recently sent UCP Grodno a warning letter that meetings larger than fifteen persons there were deemed unsafe.

Congress to Include Elections, Demonstration

¶2. (SBU) According to Lebedko, the UCP congress will include two parts. The official part of the program will include the election of the Chair, the Deputy Chair and party bodies, the approval of a plan for party development and the adoption of several messages, including a UCP "State of the Union" to contrast with Lukashenko's annual address scheduled for April 29. In addition to this formal program, about which the Ministry of Justice had been informed, the congress would include an unofficial segment, a demonstration the afternoon of April 20 at central Minsk's October Square. Lebedko noted that some delegates would gather on October Square to show their displeasure with the decision of authorities not to provide a suitable public space for the UCP's congress.

¶3. (SBU) Lebedko was quite critical of the Minsk Executive Committee's refusal to assist in the arrangement of the rental of public premises, noting that its unwillingness to mediate was contrary to its own past practice. In 2006, according to Lebedko, the Minsk City Executive Committee had intervened in a scheduling conflict, allowing the United Democratic Forces to meet at Minsk's Automobile Factory House of Culture.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) While efforts to frustrate the organization of this congress might seem to differ little from the harassment opposition politicians and civil society members face daily in Belarus, they

are actually much more sinister. The Ministry of Justice could use the UCP's failure to hold a party congress as dictated by its bylaws as grounds to seek the invalidation of the party's registration. As is our custom with congresses of Belarusian opposition parties, post will send an observer to Sunday's UCP event.

Moore
Leader